
Speech of An Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, T.D., Launch of Citizens' Dialogue on the Future of Europe, Science Gallery

Ministers, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

I'm delighted to be here today - along with my colleagues, Minister Simon Coveney and Minister Helen McEntee, and Noelle O'Connell of European Movement Ireland - to launch the Citizens' Dialogue on the Future of Europe.

Exactly seventy years ago, representatives from sixteen countries met in Paris to discuss how - in the words of Jean Monnet - they could resist economic decline and preserve political freedom. Ireland was one of those sixteen countries, and we quickly came to see the wisdom of Monnet's prediction that there was 'no future for the people of Europe other than in union.'

It is the promise of a better future that has motivated people to work for the European ideal over successive decades.

It is why we want to hear your views in the debate about its future, because we all have a stake in it, and how it evolves will affect all of us.

New challenges, such as Brexit, sharpen our focus, but we face many others. There is war and instability to the East and South; unprecedented uncontrolled migration flows; the effects of climate change; and increased fears about international terrorism.

We see the rise of new economic powers and emerging economies; and new, unpredictable regimes around the world. The inevitable march of democracy, free trade, human rights and multilateralism looks much less inevitable today than it did a few years ago.

If anyone thinks that we are stronger facing these challenges alone, then they have not heeded the lessons of the past.

On Sunday I was in Enniskillen for Remembrance Sunday.

While there, remembering the dead, it struck me that we should never forget what Europe is - and how the project started. As John Hume once stated the EU is the most successful peace process in history.

And, it is no coincidence that the development of the EU has coincided with the longest-ever period of peace and prosperity on the European continent.

Today, across all the EU institutions, we see representatives of countries that went to war with each other twice in the past 100 years, sitting side by side.

At the European Council, I am joined by 27 other Prime Ministers and Presidents, and we sit together sharing sovereignty, creating prosperity and co-operating to overcome the challenges we face.

The EU is one of the most successful political projects in human history. It brought an end to war in Europe, by creating a dynamic for peace and co-operation. The Customs Union and Single Market brought about tariff free trade, fair competition and removed regulatory barriers.

The Common Agricultural Policy has supported farm incomes, sustained rural communities, and kept food prices low and stable. It has protected the European model of family farming.

The euro has eliminated currency fluctuations within the eurozone, reduced interest rates and kept inflation low. Enlargement secured democracy and human rights in Central and Eastern Europe and then helped drive economic growth.

Our European Citizenship allows us to travel, work, trade or study anywhere from Athens to Achill, without any need for visas or work permits. And we can access each other's health services.

This year is the 30th anniversary of the creation of the Erasmus programme, allowing students the opportunity to study in another European country. It has even been estimated that these closer ties have resulted in the birth of a million Erasmus babies!

And rather than a competitive race to the bottom, EU social rights have ensured greater equality between men and women, safer workplaces, better pay, sick leave, parental leave, holidays and workers rights.

Far from being a fortress, Europe has shown itself able to be open to the world through its neighbourhood policy - the Eastern Partnership and EuroMed. You also see that in recent trade deals, for example, CETA with Canada, and the agreement between the EU and Japan which will help Irish exporters and increase FDI.

So, looking at this list of achievements, it's hard to understand why anyone might want to leave!

But, whatever happens in the next few years, one thing is certain. Ireland will always remain at the heart of the common European home we helped to build.

So, that's why, it's so important that we are actively engaged in shaping and influencing the debate about the future of Europe.

It is a conversation that we would be having even if there was no Brexit, and it is one that is at least as important.

I believe we should approach the debate on the future of Europe with a positive attitude - talking about what we want to achieve more than what we want to block or resist.

Many of the policy challenges we face are increasingly global. They cannot be met

by nation states acting alone.

Issues such as mass migration, climate change, cybersecurity, trade, and the regulation of medicines and major corporations, will not be solved by twenty-eight countries coming up with twenty-eight different solutions.

In unity there is security, in cooperation there is strength.

We also need to accept that in the Europe of the future all EU states will be small states even if they do not all realise that yet. Look at the list of the top sixty cities in the world in terms of population.

How many cities are in the European Union? The answer is one, and don't celebrate yet because it's currently getting ready to leave.

In terms of population, Germany, with 80 million people, is the only country in Europe in the top twenty in the world, and its population is falling. It's already been overtaken by Mexico, the Philippines, Ethiopia and Vietnam. Thailand already has more people than the UK, France or Italy, and Tanzania and Myanmar will over-take them all within a few years.

Population does not equate to economic or military strength but there can be no doubt that these are also shifting east and south globally.

So, we're going to need to stick together if we are to protect what we have and export our values and worldview.

The Europe of the future, I believe, must:

1st. Continue to do well what it does well.

2nd. Focus on the big new challenges facing Europe and its citizens.

3rd. Where appropriate, devolve some powers back to member states, municipalities and regions.

4th. Engage citizens more and engage in more direct democracy.

Ireland is a founder member of the euro, and a founder member of the Single Market. We now support the completion of the Single Market and the digital Single Market, which was the purpose of my recent visit to Tallinn. I want people to be able to get cheap mortgages and insurance and to get them from European lenders and insurers if need be. We believe in more free trade agreements, and in completing the monetary union. We believe a banking union to protect citizens' deposits on a pan-European basis and reduce the exposure of member states. And we think that a capital markets union would provide the building blocks for an integrated capital market across Europe.

We need to continue to have a well-funded CAP, and continue to fund programmes and policies that work in areas like research, innovation, Erasmus, interreg programmes, the EIB and so on. Budgets for these should be protected. If we develop new programmes, we should use new money to do so.

I know there is real interest in the idea of a defence union, a permanent structured co-operation framework, or PESCO.

Ireland will not join a European army, nor will we be part of a single European defence budget.

However, we want to be part of a common security and defence policy because we believe it is in our interests as a nation and in the interests of Europe. The threats we face in the 21st century include cyber terrorism, cyber attacks, international terrorism, mass migration, natural disasters, and drug and human trafficking. We want to be involved in European actions against all of these.

I also believe we can show much greater leadership on Africa. So, I support the concept of an EU 'Marshall Plan' for Africa.

We should aim to transform Africa in the way much of Asia has been transformed from a place we give aid to, and a place from which migrants flee, to a wealthy, democratic, better-governed continent we want to trade with.

In terms of improving democracy within the EU, we need to consider supporting a Europe-wide list for the European Parliament. Another reform might be to make permanent the Spitzenkandidat system, and to democratise the process of choosing candidates for other leading positions within the EU.

Through the EU we could come together to establish a single pricing and reimbursement policy for medicines. This could save billions for taxpayers, and make medicines available to patients at the same time in every country.

We can establish a common asylum policy and system, and replace the public system which isn't working.

We can put fire back into the engine of our social Europe by following through on the proclamation we will issue in Gothenburg later this week on jobs, employment rights, pensions and many other things.

I also support the proposed Subsidiarity and Proportionality Taskforce which has recently been established. It is interesting that on many matters, US states and Canadian provinces, have greater autonomy and greater variation among them than EU member states currently have. Do we have the balance right? And does everything have to be harmonised and standardised? These questions should also form part of our debate.

The EU has always offered the promise of a better future, but it is a future that will not be handed to us. We must work to create it.

By sharing our hopes, by seeking advice about our fears, and by searching for a better way of doing things, we can achieve a more perfect union.

We can create the European future that we want. Today's Citizens' Dialogue is a good place to start.

So, thank you.